

# *Bullying Prevention Initiative*

## *A Program of Community Outreach and Education*

### *Berkshire County Parent Newsletter*

#### *Fall 2012*



Dear Parent or Guardian:

Since the passage of Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010, *An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools*, Berkshire County schools and districts have been working hard to create and implement prevention plans that effect prompt and effective responses to bullying. Parents and guardians must educate themselves about the policies prohibiting bullying, cyberbullying and retaliation and understand the reporting procedures as well as consequences associated with these behaviors. Please take the time to look at this information and have a discussion with your child about what they have learned about bullying and how they can contribute to making school a place where everyone belongs. Parents and guardians play a key role in bullying prevention. I encourage you to call your child's school and get involved in the positive behavior strategies being implemented to ensure each child has a safe and happy experience at school.

Best wishes,

David F. Capeless  
Berkshire District Attorney

## Adult Response: Letting Go of Misperceptions

There are many misperceptions about bullying, all of which can lead to minimizing the behavior. A few of them include:

- **Boys will be boys.** The implication is that bullying is okay—it is natural for boys to be physically or verbally aggressive. However, research indicates aggression is a learned behavior, not a natural response.
- **Girls don't bully.** Girls can and do bully. While they do not physically bully targets as often as boys, they will often use verbal and social bullying. Bullying for girls escalates during the middle school years.
- **Bullying is a natural part of childhood.** There is nothing natural about being bullied. Bullying is often considered a normal part of childhood because it is such a common experience. Physical or emotional aggression toward others should not be tolerated as a consequence of childhood.
- **Some people deserve to be bullied.** No child's behavior merits being hurt or harmed in any manner. Instead a child who is different from others deserves to be treated with respect and consideration.
- **Bullying will make kids tougher.** In fact, research has shown it often has the opposite effect—lowering a child's sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Bullying often creates fear and increases anxiety for a child.

- **Telling a teacher about bullying is tattling.** Children need to know the difference between tattling and telling. The secrecy of bullying only serves to protect the bully and to perpetuate the behavior.

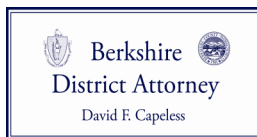
- **This can be fixed through conflict resolution or peer mediation.** These programs rely on the students being responsible for solving the problem where each party has equal negotiating power. Bullying, where there is an imbalance of power, is a form of peer abuse. The student who is being bullied needs to be protected from further victimization and therefore needs adult intervention.

*Let's dispel the old myths and help children understand that bullying is not something they just have to "deal" with.*

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## What is the Impact of Bullying?

### *For children who are bullied:*

Children who are bullied are more likely than their peers to be depressed, lonely, and anxious; have low self-esteem; feel unwell; have more migraine headaches; and think about suicide.

### *For children who bully:*

Children who bully others are more likely to be convicted of a crime as adults. Research also shows that bullying can be a sign of other serious anti-social behaviors, such as smoking, drinking alcohol and dropping out of school among others.

### *For children who witness bullying:*

Children who witness or participate (bystanders) in repeated bullying may also suffer behavioral consequences including feelings of anger and helplessness for not knowing what to do, guilt for not taking action, and fear of certain areas of schools.

## Is My Child Being Bullied?

Parents may be overcome with emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt and helplessness and may even bring up feelings that you experienced as a child.

It is important to recognize these emotions; these feelings you have will not solve the situation for your child. You should, however, validate your child's feelings. And then, focus on the issue and develop a plan.

First, you want to be sure that they are being bullied and that it is not routine childhood conflict.

You can help your child recognize bullying behavior by asking them questions about their situation.

**The following questions may be helpful:**

- What happened?
- Was it done more than once?
- Did it make you feel sad or angry?
- Did the child know you were being hurt?
- Is the other child more powerful (i.e. bigger, part of a group, perceived to be more popular) than you in some way?

*"Bullying is when someone repeatedly and on purpose says or does mean or hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself."*

*-Dr. Dan Olweus, Professor of Psychology, University of Bergen, founder of the Bullying Prevention Program*

## How Best to Support Your Child

### **Be Supportive:**

- **Never tell your child to ignore the bullying.** Often, trying to ignore bullying allows it to become more serious. If the child were able to simply ignore it, he or she likely would not have told you about it.
- **Don't blame the child who is being bullied.** Don't assume that your child did something to provoke the bullying.
- **Listen carefully** to what your child tells you about the bullying. Ask him or her questions (refer to suggestions above).
- **Empathize** with your child. Tell him or her that bullying is wrong, not his or her fault, and that you are glad he or she had the courage to tell you about it.
- **Ask your child** what he or she thinks can be done to help.
- **Let your child know** what you are going to do.
- If you disagree with how your child handled the bullying situation, **don't criticize** him or her.
- **Do not encourage physical retaliation** ("just hit them back") as a solution. Hitting another student is not likely to end the problem, and it could get your child suspended or expelled or escalate the situation.
- Help your child **become more resilient** to bullying by helping him or her recognize their positive attributes; this helps them to build confidence.
- **Teach your child safety strategies**, like seeking help from an adult when feeling threatened by a bully. Talk about who he or she would go to and role-play what he or she should say. Assure your child that reporting bullying is not the same as tattling.
- If you are concerned about how your child is coping with the stress of being bullied, speak to a **mental health professional**.



*"Encourage your child to join with others in telling bullies to stop, telling adults when they see bullying, and reaching out in friendship to isolated youth. Praise your children when they do these things. Remind them that they have the power to help."*

*-Stan Davis, author of "Schools Where Everyone Belongs" and "Empowering Bystanders in Bullying Prevention"*

## Should I Inform My Child's Teacher and Principal?



Parents are often reluctant to report bullying to school officials, but bullying may not stop without the help of adults.

- Emphasize that you want to work with the staff at school to find a solution to stop the bullying, for the sake of your child as well as other students.

- Ask the teacher about his or her observations. For example, has he or she noticed that your child is being isolated, excluded from the playground or other activities.
- Work with the school to develop a plan.

## What Are Schools Mandated To Do?

### What do schools have to do under the Massachusetts law?

- **develop, adhere to and update** (at least twice a year) **a plan** to address bullying prevention and intervention. The school must develop the plan in consultation with teachers, staff, professional support personnel, school volunteers, administrators, community representatives, local law enforcement agencies, students, parents and guardians.
- include in the plan a provision for ongoing professional development to build the skills of all staff members (except for some private schools)
- provide age-appropriate instruction on bullying in each grade (again, the exception is some private schools)  
For students with disabilities who have autism and/or are vulnerable to bullying, the IEP Team must consider and address why the student is a target and how to help the student by goals and services in the IEP.

### Are there certain things the school's bullying prevention plan must contain?

Each school's plan must include:

- definitions and prohibition of bullying, cyberbullying and retaliation
- clear **procedures for reporting** bullying
- availability of **anonymous** reporting of bullying

- **clear procedures for responding to and investigating** reports of bullying.
- the range of **disciplinary actions** that may be taken against a student who is bullying
- **clear procedures for restoring a sense of safety** for the target and **assessing** their needs for protection
- strategies for **protecting** anyone who reports bullying, provides information during an investigation, or who has reliable information about an act of bullying
- **procedures for notifying parents** or guardians of both a target and an aggressor

### Additional provisions:

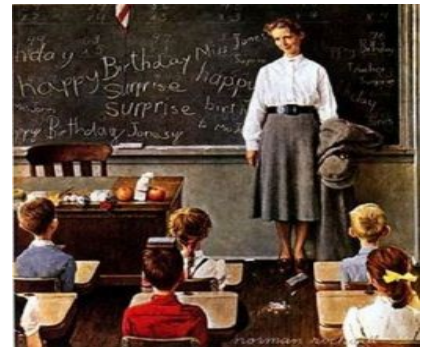
- the target's parents must be notified of the action taken to prevent further bullying
- the principal must immediately notify the local police when criminal charges may be brought
- informing parents about the school's bullying prevention plan, and how parents can reinforce the curriculum at home.
- subjecting a student who knowingly makes a **false accusation** to disciplinary action
- providing **counseling and referral** to services for targets and aggressors and their families

### What does it mean to "create a hostile environment"?

The Massachusetts law defines "hostile environment" as "a situation in which bullying causes the school environment to be permeated with intimidation, ridicule or insult that is **sufficiently severe or pervasive** to alter the conditions of the student's education." Ch. 71, §370(a) Under the federal laws, discriminatory harassment creates a hostile environment when the harassing action is severe, persistent or pervasive enough to prevent a student from enjoying the benefits of the school program.

### Does the law protect people who report bullying?

The law explicitly prohibits retaliation against a person who reports bullying or gives information during an investigation or "who has reliable information about bullying."



## What Should I Do If My Child Has Been Bullying Others?

If you find out that your child has been bullying other children, it needs to be stopped. Make it clear to your child that you take bullying seriously and that it is not okay.

Schools are trying hard to prevent bullying and to stop it if it occurs, but the message starts at home.

- Make rules within your family for your child's behavior. Praise your child for

following the rules and use nonphysical and logical consequences when rules are broken.

- Spend lots of time with your child and keep close track of his or her activities. Find out who your child's friends are and how and where they spend their free time.
- Build on your child's talents by encouraging him or her to get involved in

positive activities (such as clubs, music lessons, or nonviolent sports).

- Share your concerns with your child's teacher, counselor and/or principal. Work together to send a clear message to your child that his or her bullying must stop.
- If you and your child need more help, talk with a school counselor and/or mental health professional.



## How Can I Protect My Child From Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, hurt, embarrass, humiliate, or intimidate another person. This form of bullying can take place in many ways. Embarrassing pictures, private IM (Instant Messaging) and hateful or threatening messages can be posted on public sites or those within the social network shared by many.

According to a recent study by UCLA, 70% of teens say they have been the victim of cyberbullying. And most startling is that 90% of them did not report these incidents to an adult.

Your children are “digital natives”, growing up online and connected in many ways, 24/7. You are the first generation of parents to learn how to respond to the problem of cyberbullying, so we want to help you before things go wrong.

We have outlined four areas of concern that can help to protect your child:

1. **Learn:** Educate yourself about the current trends and risks online. Understand that your child's behavior online can impact your entire family. Social networking and other websites set minimum age requirements for creating profiles. If you allow your child to create content on a site knowing they

are below the age requirement and your child engages in inappropriate or illegal behavior online, **YOU** could be held responsible and may be sending the message that it is ok to lie. *i.e. Allowing your child to create a Facebook page when they are under the age of 13.*

**The resources below can help better inform you.**

2. **Communicate:** Talk to your children about what they are doing online, with whom, and establish rules about expected behavior while online.
  - Teach **digital citizenship:** Help youth to understand the risks, to be responsible and ethical, to pay attention to the well-being of others and to promote online civility and respect.
  - Do **NOT** overreact or take away your child's online access if they didn't do anything wrong. This may prevent them from seeking your help in the future.
3. **Protect:** Keep the computer in a high traffic area of your home and think about what information you and your child put online, such as personal information, pictures, videos. Sometimes pictures



provide information about you that you do not realize. Utilize the parental controls on your computer or available through your Internet Service Provider and consider monitoring software.

4. **Act:** Contact law enforcement and the Cyber-Tipline if you or someone you know feels threatened or in danger.

For more information, check out: [www.cyberbullying.us](http://www.cyberbullying.us)—The **Cyberbullying Research Center** serves as a clearinghouse of information concerning the ways adolescents use and misuse technology. It is intended to be a resource for parents, educators, law enforcement officers, counselors, and others who work with youth.

### Take 15 for Safety

We are aware that your time is valuable, so our Office has produced topic specific video segments in collaboration with Pittsfield Community Television, called “**Take 15**”. These fifteen minute videos will educate you on important current topics, such as **Bullying and Cyberbullying, Social Networking Sites**, and others.

[www.mass.gov/berkshireda](http://www.mass.gov/berkshireda) and click on **Take 15** to view.

## More Information and Online Resources

[www.connectsafely.org](http://www.connectsafely.org)—A non-profit that has all kinds of social-media safety tips for teens and parents, the latest teen tech news and many other resources.

[www.stopbullyingnow.com](http://www.stopbullyingnow.com)—Author and educator Stan Davis' website to help adults prevent bullying.

[www.ikeepSAFE.org](http://www.ikeepSAFE.org)—Teaches children and parents the importance of protecting personal information and avoiding inappropriate places on the internet.

[www.isafe.org](http://www.isafe.org)—Dedicated to protecting the online experiences of youth everywhere.

[www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com)—(1-800-THE-LOST) The resource to report cybercrimes.

[www.netSMART.org](http://www.netSMART.org)—The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's (NCMEC) Internet Safety resource and education program targeting children K–12, parents and educators.

[www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov)—The official U.S. Government website devoted to bullying prevention.

[www.pacer.org/bullying](http://www.pacer.org/bullying)—The PACER Center (Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights) was founded initially for parents of youth with disabilities and now has become the **National Center for Bullying Prevention**.

In addition to student and school staff presentations, many parent workshops are available, including a workshop to inform you on safe social networking practices for you and your child. Contact your school or Parent Teacher Organization to coordinate an event.

Many books and resources are available for loan at the Berkshire District Attorney's Office. [Click here](#) for a list of our resources or contact the Community Outreach and Education Department at 413-443-5951.